

Paris as 'Other': George Moore, Kate Chopin and French literary escape routes¹

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Abstract: *Even by as late as the 1890s, France – and especially Paris – represented what was other for Victorian society. This paper claims that Parisian pictures, as drawn by George Moore (notably in *Celibates and Esther Waters*) and Kate Chopin (in “*Lilacs*”), constitute gentle challenges to simplistic judgment and fundamentalist prejudice. Their portrayals are word pictures without the expected accompaniment of an obvious edifying lesson; they are neither overt nor threatening while, with dispassionate balance, they advance an insidiously persuasive case for reinterpretation of Victorian moral certainties. This essay further suggests that the Irishness of both writers may be a key factor in their artistic and modernist approaches.*

Defined sociologically, otherness is the distancing from a cultural norm of what is peripheral, marginal and incidental; it is the distancing of illicit danger from safe legitimacy; otherness is something dangerous and threatening. Additionally, it becomes an entity whose very separateness inspires curiosity, invites enquiring knowledge. The other is to be veiled – and unveiled. So much of that Jordanova definition (Jordanova 109-10) is instantly applicable to Paris and France as viewed by the English-speaking world of the late-Victorian or fin-de-siècle period: the country and its capital are thankfully distant, dangerous (whether temptingly or repulsively so), but yet arouse interest. Paris and France were portrayed thus, as politically, sociologically, morally, literarily and militarily ‘other’. The recurring depictions of that otherness displayed black-and-white, Manichean polarities, chauvinistic judgement and fundamentalist prejudice. There were many reasons for such stances but a recent defence journal analysis of the military position in the nineteenth century provides a pithy summing up that is equally applicable to the world of literature at the time: its verdict was that Britain needed its neighbour in order to define itself.² That meant that the politico-military establishment could persuade itself three times in the course of the nineteenth century that France would invade, an attitude that defied objective logic, and particularly so in the wake of the 1870 French defeat by Prussia. Similarly, and with equal lack of good evidence, the image of invading French mores – via yellow-covered novels and their

sphere of influence – spawned a succession of alerts amongst those who were devoted to the cause of maintaining societal control through repelling French dirt, immorality and revolutionary tendencies. Those yellow books were “an instant signifier of immorality” (Flint 138. 287). The resultant prohibitions on what might be published are well-known; they caused angst and frustration to creative writers, from Trollope to Hardy, from George Moore to George Gissing. However, censorship and repression also generated resistance tactics. This essay will focus on some of the literary routes taken by George Moore (1852-1933) and Katherine O’Flaherty, better known as Kate Chopin (1851-1904), as they undermined the facile assumptions of Paris as dangerous other, and so broadened fiction’s horizons. Texts that furnish interesting examples of their techniques include Chopin’s story “Lilacs” (1894), Moore’s novel *Esther Waters* (1894), and his stories “Mildred Lawson” and “Agnes Lahens” in *Celibates* (1895).

As far as is known, Moore and Chopin were not acquainted. Yet, while the degrees of their French and Irish experiences and heritage are not identical, they share many common features and there are remarkable congruities in their interests, reading, concerns, writings, and their subversion of contemporary taboos. George Moore, landlord, born in Ireland, and with distinguished Irish forebears, spent much time in the cultural whirl of Parisian literary and artistic circles in the 1870s. The influences of that period continued to permeate his literary output, both during his years in Dublin and later in London. Katherine O’Flaherty, who became Kate Chopin after her marriage, physically visited Paris only once in her life, on her honeymoon in 1870. However, her immersion in French language and literature, augmented by her Irish and Creole blood, furnished her with alternative models for life and literature. According to William Trevor, the writer’s ability to perceive and render difference is aided by distance (Trevor, interview); distanced and sensitised to disparity by their genes, their history, and their exposure to linguistic diversity, Moore and Chopin were perfectly placed to discern and depict constraint, and to intimate the possibilities of greater freedom.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the ‘otherness’ of novels and literature emanating from, or influenced by, France was frequently an extremely hot topic in Britain. It was not clinically or scientifically defined but rather described polemically in the most lurid terms. Since parliamentary language is the phrase usually employed to indicate a degree of moderation and decorum, it is ironic that restraint was totally lacking in the phraseology used at the time in London’s parliament (and outside it) to portray the fearsome qualities of the invading forces of French literature: bestial novels, noxious and licentious literature, immoral books, corrupting, impure, odious, obscene, filthy and indecent, garbage, depraved and lascivious, prurient detail, novels only fit for swine, death to a nation, the moral fibre of the Empire eaten out, Rome in the time of the Caesars, the great goddess Lubricity.³ The excesses of those descriptions serve more than to gratify any sense of intellectual or moral superiority that we may feel today; they do more than provide the mild amusement we can derive from the type of fanatical and outrageous condemnation quoted by Bernard Shaw in *The Quintessence*

of Ibsenism. They constitute a benchmark and a yardstick against which the very different literary strategies of two contemporary writers may be measured and analysed. The word ‘strategy’ is used advisedly: in the cases of George Moore, a pioneering campaigner for literary freedom in the English novel, and of Kate Chopin, an artistic and courageous practitioner, the approaches are literarily skilful – and very definitely tactical. The Moore and Chopin responses belong neither to the Victorian school of the moralising novel, nor to the New Woman didacticism of the 1890s, nor yet again to direct journalistic confrontation mode; their reactions are more subtle and measured. In their prose, Paris and France take on greater complexity and authenticity, partly through an evanescence in depictions, and partly from the plurality of pictures, both qualities that are persuasively subversive of any simplistic or negative representation.

Just two contrasting images pertain to Paris and France in George Moore’s bestselling novel of 1894, *Esther Waters*. One concerns the elopement of William, a footman, with Miss Peggy, a minor heiress. In William’s account “We first went to Boulogne, that’s in France; but everyone speaks English there ...Then we went on to Paris. The race-meetings is very ‘andy – I will say that for Paris – half an hour’s drive and there you are”. Paris is “all the place for fashion and the shops is good”. However Miss Peggy “got tired of it too, and we went to Italy” (209). In those few lines, France might be seen as an appropriate destination for the illicit lovers, yet it was one where William could consort with both Anglophone and English people. Paris is not presented as an exotic location but merely in terms of convenience to racecourses – the implicit comparison is with the relatively longer and more awkward journeys from London to Epsom, Ascot or York. It is also seen in terms of fashion and shops –very attractive to the ordinary citizen in the early years of the department stores – and they are, to all intents and purposes, morally neutral. Paris appears even more ‘normal’ when contrasted with William and Peggy’s next destination, Italy. In William’s words “A beast of a place – nothing but sour wine and all the cookery done in oil, and nothing to do but seeing picture-galleries” (210). In the context of the entire story, this episode is so brief that the vision of Paris is reduced to a mere aside, a city of no importance, defined in terms of proximity to racecourses and the absence of sour wine, a capital that doesn’t either thrill or intimidate a mere footman. Far from posing a threat, or being a terrifying other, Paris is clearly manageable.

In *Esther Waters*, the second glimpse of a potential sphere of French influence occurs in the portrait of Miss Rice, a lady novelist who employs Esther as a servant, pays her above the going rate and treats her as a friend. Miss Rice’s friends are “principally middle-aged ladies” (186). Most significantly, she herself is described as “one of those secluded maiden ladies so common in England, whose experience of life is limited to a tea-party, and whose further knowledge of life is derived from the yellow-backed French novels which fill their bookcases” (204). The yellow-backed French novels have obviously not made them depraved, nor have they in any way corrupted them, despite their protected environment. The presence of such books on their bookshelves can be

taken as indicative of their relative impotence in that regard; in turn, ownership of such volumes by Miss Rice and her like can actually bestow a certain middle-class respectability on the books. French novels are never again mentioned in this text. For the reader, their existence is peripheral to the central story and to any subplots. The reference is almost tangential, there is no allusion to any related controversy; however, Moore makes sure, not just to insinuate it, but to establish the innocence of such literature by safe, bourgeois association.

Paris is where Mildred Lawson in *Celibates* (1895) wants to go to study art and “be free”. She had “once been fond of drawing ... she would do anything sooner than settle down with Alfred” (5). Prior to departure, this discontented and privileged young woman views Paris as the artists’ Mecca and dreams of studying there and making excursions to paint landscapes. On arrival, the view from behind the lace curtains is less than exciting: “the street is dingy enough” and “I don’t think much of Paris” (54). A few hours later, her opinion changes: “So happy was she in the sense of real emancipation from the bondage of home – so delighted was she in the spectacle of the great boulevard, now radiant with spring sunlight” (60). In rapid succession, we glimpse cafés, fancy cravats, aproned waiters, green absinthe, little shop girls in tight black dresses, and an arcade of shops (61). Mildred enjoys the good cuisine of a humble French café although it is hinted that her inclination might be to choose more formal and luxurious dining that is also available. Thus far, Paris has innocent attractions; yet daring artistic liberty is available, the freedom to reject working in the ladies’ studio and to choose the men’s studio where the artists’ models are undraped (54). When a letter arrives, encouraging Mildred to join other painters at Barbizon near Fontainebleau, it dangles the combination of artistic opportunities, romantic possibilities and economic living in a beautiful setting (128). It is apparent to the reader that Paris and France provide desirable choice – not compulsion. Juxtaposed against the lifestyle available to Mildred in Sutton, Surrey – tennis parties with the neighbours, housekeeping for brother or husband (148) – the dice would appear heavily loaded in favour of France.

If it hadn’t been for one particular English lady, Mildred might never have got to Paris. Initially, she lives there with that Mrs Fergus who is a *rara avis* for the period – an honours graduate from Oxford, and enthusiast for the philosophy of Frenchman Auguste Comte. Although she has all the externals of the dreaded bluestocking and a whiff of New Woman, Mrs Fergus is still eminently sensible, very caring and generous and obviously not diverted from what Victorian England might have considered an ethical lifestyle by any inescapable, malevolent Parisian forces, or by a French philosopher. Yet again, Moore reinforces the lesson: it is not a matter of England good, Paris bad; real life can never be that simplistic. Mildred is presented as a plausible personification of Victorian hypocritical inconsistencies – but she is also portrayed somewhat sympathetically, as a victim of the tight Victorian grip on young women of her milieu and lack of education. When she is caught, one by one, in the legendary Parisian traps (of sex, religion, money), one could infer that blame might be due more

to the masculinist and patriarchal culture of English society rather than to any predatory seductive forces of the immoral French.

Such an intimation is further underpinned by the allusion to Mildred's conversion to Roman Catholicism while in France. She explains her subsequent lack of religious practice and her *à la carte* attitude to beliefs by saying she is a "Newmanite" (202,204). This is a neat reversal of the blame game; it is Moore's quick reminder to readers about John Henry Newman whose departure to Roman Catholicism had split the Anglican communion, and additionally about the many upper class and intellectual British who, without any French influence, had turned from the Church of England to Rome. It was not necessary after all to cross the Channel to be swayed into changing religious affiliation.

In George Moore's 1886 novel *A Drama in Muslin*, Lord Dungory's compliments to women are in the French language, and the text describes the phrases as "the stock-in-trade of the old roué" (27). That suspect overtone is also attached to the conversations in French between Olive Lahens and her lover Lord Chadwick in the story "Agnes Lahens" in *Celibates*. As Olive's daughter, the naive Agnes, says to Lord Chadwick, "you used to speak French to mother. I never could understand why" (390). But the English peer and his mistress have chosen to associate that language with their illicit love, to use French to preserve secrecy and to enhance their private enjoyment. In favouring that linguistic choice – the language of diplomacy and the badge of a degree of education and privilege – French is appropriated by them for themselves, rather than making it 'other'. In the same tale, Lilian Dare (the name is not without significance) plans a *rendezvous* in Paris with Mr St. Clare. Once more, without any labouring of the point, it is made clear that their plan is hatched in Grosvenor Street and that any immorality is transferred from London to Paris, rather than the reverse. More than that, the French language is not to be the sole preserve of those whom the text portrays as debauched or *déclassé* – what Agnes did not comprehend previously, she would now understand as she has learned French at school. Thus, French is now also the language of the pure-minded, idealistic and innocent young girl: that social accomplishment, not to speak of Agnes's mix of innocence and purity, was surely espoused by Victorian society as a cultural norm, not rejected as other.

Although Katherine O'Flaherty, later to be Kate Chopin, was born in St Louis and spent much of her life between that city and New Orleans, the ethos of her environment and that of American society embodied all of what would be called Victorian strictures. Book publishing and circulation and content were controlled in much the same way as was done in England. Like George Moore, Chopin's literary influences were French and they included Daudet, Flaubert, Zola, and Maupassant. She translated stories by Maupassant and she read both 'yellow books' and *The Yellow Book*. Like Moore, she knew Edgar Degas. Like Moore, she too had her problems with censorious publishers and reviewers (Seyersted 52-9, 173-181). The Paris that the reader encounters in "Lilacs" is the home of Madame Adrienne Farival who, at the first perfume of lilac blossom⁴ every year for the previous four years, has abandoned the city, without leaving word of her whereabouts, to return for a two-week stay to the convent in rural France

where she had once been a pupil. Her Parisian apartment with housekeeper and maid, her luxuries, her singing career, and her many adoring male admirers make up a lifestyle that stands in marked contrast to the simplicity of the convent rooms and to the orderly timetable of its affairs. The flavour of her Parisian existence is conveyed by her clothes, “a charming negligé”, her pose “reclining negligently in the depths of a luxurious armchair” (222), her refreshment “a bottle of Château Yquem and a biscuit and my box of cigarettes” (225), the room “bright” and “in its accustomed state of picturesque disorder. Musical scores were scattered upon the open piano. Thrown carelessly over the backs of chairs were puzzling and astonishing-looking garments” (222). Sophie, the housekeeper, tells of the lovelorn M. Henri one year, and M. Paul the next year, who are prostrate with grief at Adrienne’s unexplained absences. The picture is one that suggests, rather than mirrors, the wanton Paris conjured up and decried by moralists of the Victorian period. However, it simultaneously conveys a sophistication that is seductively elegant and very far from the standards intimated by the celebrated Mrs Beeton in decrying what she deemed a general French habit – that of gargling at table.⁵

From this exotic world, Adrienne brings rich gifts to the convent: a necklace of gems for the statue of the virgin, a silver and ebony crucifix, a richly embroidered altar cloth. She arrives in plain dress, with a simple black trunk, is put up in a bare white room, goes to mass each morning and sings in the choir on Sundays. Her attachment to the convent and its farm is patent: she even notices changes in the vegetable patch, views the extended poultry yard, and chats with the elderly gardener who reminisces about Adrienne’s schoolgirl pranks. The nuns are welcoming and “It was to Adrienne indescribably sweet to rest there in soft low converse with this gentle-faced nun, watching the approach of evening” (221). “How infinitely calm, peaceful, penetrating was the charm of the verdant, undulating country spreading out on all sides of her!” (226). For Adrienne, this is the “haven of peace, where her soul was wont to come and refresh itself” (228). The contrast between Paris and province, metropolis and arcadia, could not be clearer. But just as Arcadia is merely an imagined rural paradise, an unsuspected, unparadisiacal reality surfaces in the place she has chosen for her spiritual and physical retreat. Adrienne notices the signs; yet, in the warmth of the reception accorded her by the ordinary nuns, she fails to read them. What does she see? a new picture of the Sacré-Cœur, a fresh coat of paint for the statue of St Joseph, but neglect of the Blessed Virgin’s statue, and no sign of St Catherine’s picture. Is it patriarchy in the ascendant and a banishing of the feminine? The Mother Superior was “dignity in person: large, uncompromising, unbending” and would not “so much as step outside the door of her private apartments to welcome this old pupil” (217). On Adrienne’s next visit, she is not permitted to enter, her gifts to the convent are returned to her at the door together with a letter from the Mother Superior banishing her forever from the convent. The reasons are not disclosed in the text, there is no authorial comment. Adrienne weeps “with the abandonment of a little child” and her tears outside the door are matched by those of Sister Agathe within (228).

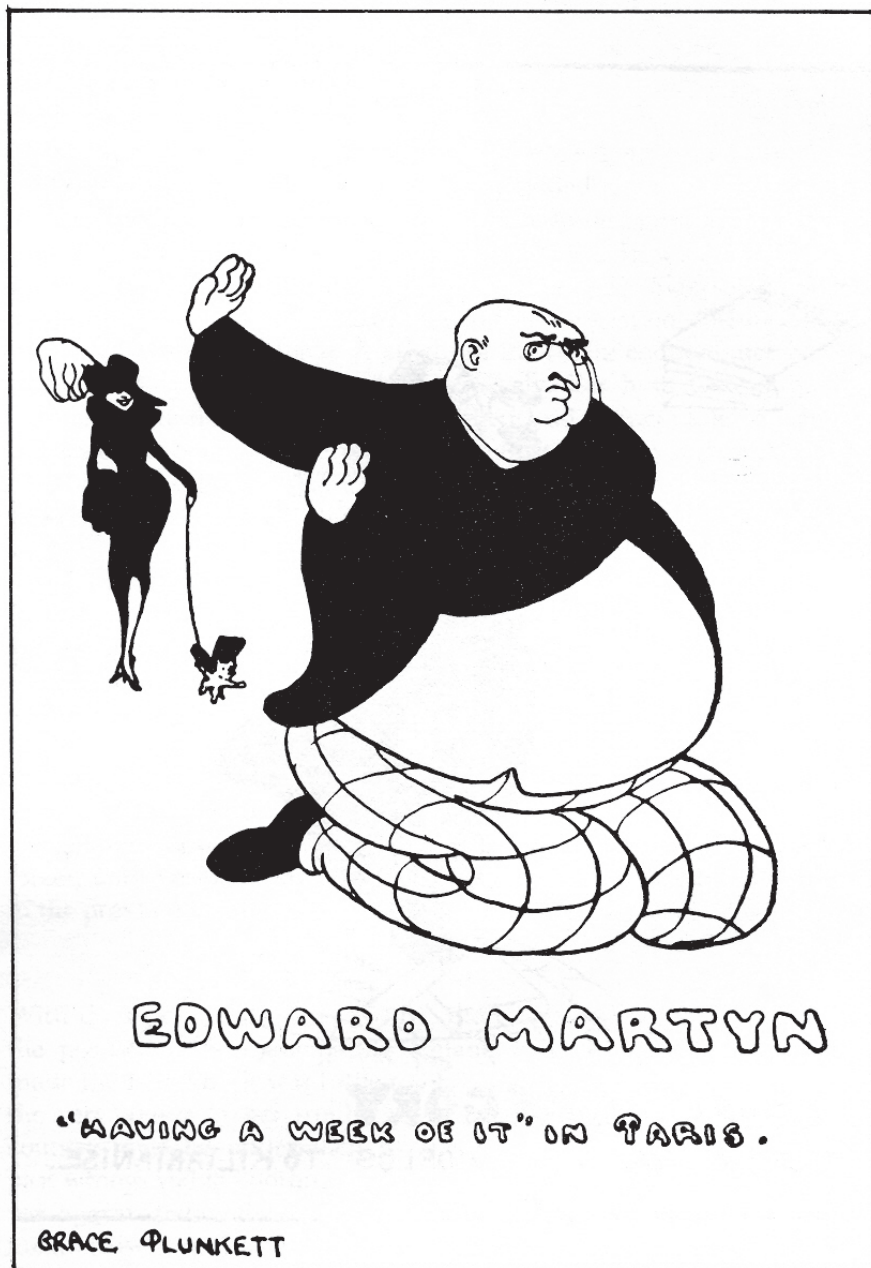
For readers, juxtaposition of Adrienne's Paris and her spiritual retreat must inevitably generate some re-evaluation of the assumed location of virtue, a reconsideration of the needs of the total person, an assessment of the proper relationship between charity and the rule of law – and maybe, in the light of the harsh regime in a supposed pastoral paradise, a greater degree of reluctance to see Paris as 'other'. Hothouse roses are the blooms of Adrienne's Parisian apartment, lilacs are the flowers of the countryside –and this story ends as Adrienne's lilac blossoms are swept away from the convent portico. That symbolic gesture is indicative of a cold, barren and colourless time in Arcadia.

The inclusion of reference to religion, and particularly to Roman Catholicism, is worthy of note since both Chopin and Moore had family background and education in that church. In "Mildred Lawson" and in "Lilacs" lurk the shadows of issues connected with ultramontanism, especially its controlling and constraining nature in comparison with images of the Celtic or the Gallican churches prior to the first Vatican Council of 1868.⁶ The conflict between ultramontane structure and national church revolved around a more rigid control from Rome or a greater freedom locally, and this was increasingly so following the declaration of papal infallibility (opposed by Newman) at the Council. Thus, additional juxtaposition of inflexibility and self-determination is interleaved into the Moore and Chopin stories. As patriarchal domination is seen to impoverish and to be impoverished, its authority is effectively challenged and its verdicts on the 'other' made suspect.⁷

In painting and generating pictures of Paris, George Moore and Kate Chopin provide sketches of a city that is 'other' in various senses, some of which are blameless and attractive. With signals that confound the disapproving certainty of the censorious, Paris is depicted as a place to which one might legitimately escape for a brighter, fuller, warmer existence without being dragooned into iniquity. Chopin and Moore subvert the picture of Paris as predatory and evil, and, to an extent, they reverse the location of any putative problem by indicating that potential wrongdoing arises both nearer home and in pastoral settings. In more than one sense, these authors proffer escape in literary terms also, because in choosing to float the suggestion of Parisian excellence and reality past the reader, both authors have lifted the literary debate to a higher plane and have made their riposte in truly literary terms. They have not engaged in journalistic polemic or its inflammatory language. To employ Vance Packard's mid-twentieth century terminology, they use hidden persuaders. In more lofty Aristotelian terms, their rhetoric is persuasive because their truth is made apparent rather than argued.

Since portrayals of Thomas O'Flaherty and George Henry Moore (fathers of the two authors) evince considerable similarity (Seyersted 14-16; Frazier 2-4, 7-12, 95, 115), one might venture to attribute some degree of the shared visions of George Moore and Kate Chopin to their Irishness. Certainly, awareness of colonial reality and discrimination, together with familiarity with different and mixed races, and exposure to varied cultural experiences, were key ingredients⁸ in making Moore and Chopin aware

of the wide spectrum of humankind, and in rendering them keenly responsive to the need for broader horizons than restrictive society might envisage and decree in the late-nineteenth century. That heritage infiltrates their compositions and contributes to their potential classification as modernist – not just in the formal elements of lack of omniscient narrators, or in the absence of ‘closed’ endings but in their definite rejection of the binary certainties that were a key element of the novelistic tradition that had preceded them, one that generally defined Paris as ‘other’.



Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was given at the conference of the British Association for Victorian Studies (George Moore panel) in Cheltenham in September 2005.
- 2 http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/events/conf2004/entente_cordiale.pdf. "The Entente Cordiale: War and Empire" by Prof Hew Strachan, Oxford. First published in *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* and *Defense Nationale* in April 2004. Peter Keating suggests in *The Haunted Study*. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989) that France rather than French fiction caused problems for "moral protesters" (129).
- 3 Characteristic examples from Parliamentary debates in May 1888.
- 4 This triggering of memory by sensory stimulus antedates Proust's madeleines by over a decade.
- 5 Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, 1859-1861.
- 6 Intimated also in Moore's *The Lake* (1905).
- 7 In "Lilacs", the 'demotions' of St Catherine and the Virgin are consonant with the patriarchal tone of the ultramontane while the 'elevation' of the Sacré Cœur typifies its devotional program; in "Mildred Lawson", similar rigidity is located in the Anglican Communion (246).
- 8 For the relationship with "*littérature mineure*", see my "His Father's Son: the political inheritance" in *George Moore: Artistic Visions and Literary Worlds* (Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming).

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